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RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 0668
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 2637
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2016
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BISHKEK 000946

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SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN KYRGYZSTAN: CLAMPING DOWN OR
BUSINESS AS USUAL?

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Classified By: CDA Lee Litzenberger, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Chairman of the State Agency for Religious Affairs (SARA), Toigonbek Kalmatov, told the press July 12 that Kyrgyzstan needed "tougher" legislation to combat religious extremism, and SARA was working on "five draft laws." Kalmatov claimed that over 400 religious organizations, including Hizb-ut Tahrir, Falun Gong, and the Unification church, were unregistered, and thus operating illegally in Kyrgyzstan. Kalmatov vowed to work with civil society, NGOs, and media to educate society on the dangers of religious extremism, intolerance, and religious discrimination. Kyrgyz law already requires that all religious organizations register with SARA, and it is not clear at this point what Kalmatov intends by promulgating "tougher" laws. Prior to the press conference, Kalmatov told the Embassy he wanted to hold an interfaith festival and to establish a think tank to focus on religious tolerance, and our conversations with SARA staff indicate they are looking to consult broadly in drafting new laws. We will closely monitor the development of SARA's draft amendments to Kyrgyzstan's laws on religion and will make clear to SARA that we expect any new legislation to respect religious freedom. End Summary.

TOUGHER LAWS NEEDED?

12. (SBU) SARA Chairman Toigonbek Kalmatov told the press July 12 that Kyrgyzstan needed "tougher" legislation to curb the activities of radical religious organizations. Kalmatov said that Kyrgyzstan had fairly liberal laws on registration, and while every religious organization was required to register with SARA, any religious organization would be registered as long as its charter did not contradict Kyrgyz law. Kalmatov said there were 2142 officially registered organizations, but over 400 faith-based groups that were operating without

registration, and thus illegally, in Kyrgyzstan. To combat such activities, SARA was working on "five draft laws" on religious activities. Kalmatov, however, did not provide any details of the drafts.

13. (C) Kalmatov said that the "current religious situation" demanded serious attention. He expressed concern about the activities of the banned Hizb-ut Tahrir and other "destructive" groups. He also commented on an increase in proselytizing, which was creating tensions in some villages. Kalmatov said that a number of organizations banned in other countries -- such as Hizb-ut Tahrir, the Unification Church, Falun Gong, the White Brotherhood, and the Maharishi movement -- were "creating problems" in Kyrgyzstan. While the constitution protected freedom of religion, Kalmatov said, such entities should not promote activities that are not in line with Kyrgyz law. At the same time, Kalmatov vowed to work with civil society, NGOs, other government agencies, and media to educate society on the dangers of religious extremism, intolerance, and religious discrimination.

GOING TOO FAR?

14. (C) One minority religious leader expressed concern that the changes in the law could be used against them. Baptist Pastor Shumlin Aleksandr told us he was concerned about the possibility of additional pressure against missionaries, and he cited the ongoing difficulties of one Baptist church in Karakulja to obtain registration from SARA, despite repeated attempts to do so. A former SARA official complained to us about the "unprofessional attitude" of the current SARA leadership and warned that SARA's policy could actually push the country toward greater "Islamization".

BUSINESS AS USUAL?

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15. (C) SARA officials dismissed claims that the government was clamping down on religious freedom. SARA religious issues expert Kanybek Mamataliyev told us that Kalmatov was trying to improve the conditions for religious freedom in Kyrgyzstan by speaking out publicly against intolerance and the activities of banned religious groups. Janybek Botoyev, a SARA lawyer, added separately that SARA was forming a working group with representatives from religious organizations and civil society to draft a new law on religion. He hoped that a draft could be submitted to parliament by the fall. (Note: SARA has been working on a new law on religious organizations since 2001. End Note.)

PROMOTING TOLERANCE BY FOLLOWING U.S. EXAMPLE

16. (C) Kalmatov returned July 7 from the United States after participating in an International Visitor (IV) program focused on religious diversity and inter-faith dialogue. In a meeting with us held prior to the press conference, Kalmatov went on at length how he had been impressed by the interfaith dialogue in the U.S. and wanted to emulate such practices in Kyrgyzstan. He said he planned to stage an interfaith festival, and he also wanted to establish a think tank to focus on religious tolerance issues. He also thought there could be greater cooperation with theology faculties at universities.

COMMENT

17. (C) There is an obvious disconnect between Kalmatov's call for "tougher" laws and his remarks -- at the press conference and to us -- about promoting tolerance and inter-faith dialogue. Kalmatov believes there should be more public education about the dangers of extremism, but he also seems

to believe that "tougher" laws will help SARA to deal with the problem. Kyrgyz law already requires that all religious organizations register with SARA, and it is not clear at this point what Kalamatov intends by promulgating "tougher" laws. Our conversations with SARA staff indicate they are looking to consult broadly in drafting new laws, however. We will closely monitor the development of SARA's draft amendments to Kyrgyzstan's laws on religion and make clear to SARA that we expect any new legislation to respect religious freedom.

LITZENBERGER